

# STEPHEN KING'S THE RUNNING MAN: A NOVEL OF SOCIAL REALISM

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## The Running Man (1982)

*The Running Man* is also published under the pseudo name Richard Bachman in 1982. The novel is set in dystopian America during the year 2025. The novel narrates the economical and social conditions of future America. Unlike *The Long Walk*, this novel takes place in the world of adult. In the earlier novel King showed how the teenage boys become a victim of so called American society. The competition turns the fatal game as one boy after another is 'ticketed'. In *The Running Man* the protagonist participates in the game show The Running Man in which contestants are allowed to go anywhere in the world. But they are chased by the employed hunters to finish their life. Thus, *The Running Man*, based on the future game show in which loosing contestants die—and which no one has ever one, creates everlasting horror among readers.

Ben Richards is the protagonist of the novel. He comes from a suburb area located in the country Detroit in the year 2025. The economic and political condition of America is worsened. Richards has no job at all as he is blacklisted from his trade. He is in the dire need of money to get medicine for his seriously ill daughter Cathy. His wife has turned prostitute to earn money for the family. Frustrated Ben turns to a government operated TV station which runs a violent game show. After various mental and physical tests Ben is selected for the game.

However, he is informed and warned by Dan Killian, the executive of the game about the fatality of the game.

There are so many prizes declared by the authorities. Such as the contestants earn \$100 if he stays alive and avoids capture. If he survived for 30 days, he can get a grand prize of \$1 billion. He can go anywhere in the world. But he has to send messages back to the studio. Failing this, he will be pushed out of the game, but will continue to be hunted. No contestant participated in the game has survived to claim the prize. Knowing this, Richards participates in the game. He is declared as the enemy of the state and released with 12 hour head start before a group of hunters kills him.

The novel henceforth records some fatal experiences of Richards. He travels in false identification first to New York and then to Boston. He manages to escape from the explosion which kills five policemen. Accidentally, he meets the gang member Bradley and takes shelter with him. Here he learns many things from Bradley. As the novel progresses, Richards arrives at New Hampshire where he disguises himself as a half-blind priest. Herein he learns that one of the contestants has been killed by the hunters. He dreams that Bradley has betrayed him.

His journey to Portland Maine proves to be fatal one. He cannot stay longer in the house of a friend of Bradley as he is reported by the owner's mother. Somehow, Richards manages to escape from the mishap. The novel henceforth gives a detailed account of Richards's journey and how he escapes from the dangers. By this time, he learns that he has broken the running man survival record of eight days and five hours.

Readers surprise when Richards is offered the job of a lead hunter by Killian. He hesitates to take the job thinking that his family members will be targeted. But he learns from Killian that his wife and daughter were cruelly killed over ten days earlier. Subsequently, Richards accepts the job. The novel ends with the plane crashing into the tower killing both Killian and Richards.

The novel -set in future -records many things of future America. It focuses on the extreme gap between rich and poor. The poor are forced to live in filthy conditions where disease and violence constantly accompany them. It also shows the fatal union of Government and television to play with the lives of poor and innocents. The government is unwilling to protect poor people from the deadly air pollution of the cities. This is nothing but 'collective other' that both Campbell and King depict in their novels. Like Campbell, King effectively depicts this 'other'. At one point in the novel Richards experiences it:

The Sten gun rattled again, and this time a bullet punched through his left arm, knocking him sideways. The heavy car tried to veer and get him, and for a moment he had a clear shot at the figure behind the wheel. . . Richards still could not get to his feet so he began to crawl towards the car. . . (137-138).

The organized crime of the authorities or private groups is a thing of concern for both Campbell and King. This very idea that human race is not at all safe either in present or in future generates horror than any supernatural horror novel. *The Running Man* is a perfect weird fiction as it puts readers in the world of uncertainty where they cannot predict what will happen next. The novel is packed with unexpected events and incidents. The protagonist, contestants as well as

readers are put in the macabre world which, as King feels, upcoming world dangerous for human beings.

The novel from its very beginning to the end successfully keeps readers under the tension of terror, horror and fear. As the hunters chase Richards, the horror begins griping readers and it persists till the end of the novel. This is the special feature of the novel. In short, *The Running Man* generates far more horror than the supernatural horror novel. Dr. S. T. Joshi has praised the novel for the frightening aspect of the novel:

And the final confrontation between Richards and the government agents who ultimately track him down may be the single most intense episode in all King's work. *The Running Man* is, strictly speaking, a science-fiction novel, but it certainly has enough horrific overtones to be classified well within the weird tale (82).

At one point in the novel readers witness horror of Richards:

But on Tuesday morning he stayed in, not going to the library. It seemed to him that every minute he stayed in this place was an invitation to quick doom. Looking out the window, he saw a Hunter with a black hood inside every old beaner and slumped taxi driver. Fantasies of gunmen creeping soundlessly toward his door tormented him. He felt a huge clock was ticking in his head (123-124).

King makes his readers to feel horror creeping over him as he watches the horrible experiences of the protagonist. This writing style of King horrifies readers as well. Moreover, the novel is packed with unexpected incidents and events. The horror story has no logical order. Horror novels give a message of anything at can

happen at any moment in human life. Gothic and supernatural horror novelist underlined the thing that human life is at the mercy of supernatural elements. They, according to their whims, can play with human life to mutilate it or to finish it off. They chase their victims, exploit them, and kill them whenever they wish to be. Like Gothic and supernatural horror novelists, Ramsey Campbell and Stephen King are worried about safety human life. Instead of supernatural elements, they prefer human icons of horror. Their novels discussed in this project lack monsters, ghosts and other supernatural elements and put forth unknown faces of the known people. Gothic and supernatural horror elements confined their victims behind the closed walls or in the remote castle. Campbell's and King's human icons of horror never confine their victims in the closed space. They allow them to runaway, to walk or to run. They are not confined but they are in danger. The protagonist of *Pact of the Fathers* Daniella Logan, Ben Richards in *The Running Man* and Davis Garraty in *The Long Walk* are not confined to one place. But they feel the whole world is a prison for them, the prison that has no walls at all. This idea shakes readers with both terror and horror. Human beings, as Campbell and King feel, are deliberately pushed in the realm of horror. Sometime by the group for its preaching, sometime by the Government and its agents under the name of game.

Gothic and cosmic icons of horror looked and are still looking at the human world as an abode of its victims. They made the world and human body the place for the game to play. Many novels that deal with body horror underline the fact. Campbell and King tell the same thing just they bring in human icons of horror. The world, for these icons, is a place to play games and competition to take human life off. This very idea shakes readers with horror. And *The Running Man*

shows the same thing so it is a perfect horror novel. Here is one more piece of King's writing which rouses horror:

Richards hung up his jacket, slipped off his shoes, and lay down on the bed. He realized how miserable and unknown and vulnerable he was in the world. The universe seemed to shriek and clatter and roar around him like a huge indifferent jalopy rushing down a hill and toward the lip of bottomless chasm. His lips began to tremble, and then he cried a little (56).

In short, *The Running Man* is a perfect horror novel. King incorporates cinematic technique, speedy technique, unresolved ending and shock-treatment technique in the story of the novel. He puts his protagonist amid the cruel and crazy world only to meet fatal events and incidents. The novel with its themes of economical and social change in future America; the corrupted authority of the country and suffering and exploitation of the poor and the wide gap between the rich and the poor never allows readers to forget the novel. And Stephen twists his tale in his style which makes the novel more horrific and tense. Readers cannot shake off the horror that King rouses through his novels.